3t Mukherjea O. Y-4, 5 (ca. 1933-1939) 1962
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In the early morning one sees the ground strewn with the flowers and the Santals carefully gather the mohua flowers in the baskets. The Pipal, with its gnarled roots and spreading branches serves as the resting place and meeting ground of the Santals, and the Palas with its yellowish blaze of colour dazzles the country-side in the wintry months of the year.[1]

Large tracts of forests are frequently found within the area, the abode of ferocious tigers, elephants, *sambar* deer, leopards, hyaenas, deer and wild-pigs. The marshes abound in wild-ducks, pigeons, geese, snipe and partridge.

In the summer months, the heat is intense and rises in places upto 120° degrees and dust-storms and "loo" (*heat-wave*) are the rules rather than the exception. The rain-fall compared to Bengal is very low but it is cold during the winter, the minimum record being on an average 40° degrees.

The area in Bengal that falls within our scope is a belt of irregular thickness and furnishes a gradual change from the plateau to the plains of Bengal in an undulation, interspersed with forest growths at places. Here, more specially in Bankura, small isolated hillocks and short ranges of low hills, form,

1. Ref. *Dt. Gazetteer*, Santal Parganas, Vol. XXII, pp. 16-17. It is however incorrectly stated therein that that the *Palas* is in blossom in the hot season of the year, for it is only peculiar to the winter.

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They owe their present position of affluence to Santal habits of insobriety. Secondly, much of the land has been acquired by trading castes from Bihar who followed the Santals when the country was being opened up. They brought with them such things as salt and cooking oil, which they exchanged for grain. Clothing was added at a later date, for until within living memory Santals largely wove their own clothes from cotton grown on the lands surrounding their homesteads. Like the Sundis, these traders provided credit facilities for their customers and so gained power over them. The monsoon fails on the average once in seven years in Western Bengal, and the traders import grain in times of scarcity. Formerly this was lent out at a recognized rate of interest amounting to 100 per cent. per annum. The only security which a Santal had to offer was a mortgage on his land, and, if the trader wished it, the almost inevitable result was an action in the courts, followed by an auction at which the creditor purchased the land. The third important class among the landlords are the Brahmins, descendants of the men who were brought into the country to act as priests and court officials to the local *rajas* or rulers. At the time when British rule was being established many of these *rajas* exercised control over tracts of country that were largely covered by forest and sparsely inhabited. They encouraged Santals and some other peoples to settle as cultivators, and they also rewarded the services of their Brahmin officials by grants of land. Brahmins are forbidden by caste rules to engage in cultivation, so they in their turn encouraged Santals to become their tenants.

The Santals have a proverb: "A *Deko* friend is like a thorn fence." In other words, if you stumble into it you are liable to suffer from scratches. They sometimes make fun of themselves and exaggerate the fear that they feel. Thus: "The elders used to run away and hide in the jungle whenever they saw an umbrella approaching the village." But in spite of the fun, the fear persists. A difficulty arose a few years ago in a village Santal church when the superintending missionary placed there as pastor a man who was a *Deko*. This resulted in a vigorous protest, and the leader of the villagers' delegation summed up their feelings in the following parable: "When a kite is wheeling overhead the chickens all take shelter under their mother's wings. After they have grown up they know that the kite can do them no harm, but nevertheless whenever a kite is overhead they quake inwardly and cannot get on with their pecking." In the company of non-Santals, a Santal is inclined to become tongue-

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CHAPTER 3

THE RHYTHM OF DAILY LIFE

The rhythm of daily life in an agricultural community grows out of the close relationship between the activities of man and the cycle of nature. Work and recreation depend upon the seasons and their contrasts of heat and cold, of dry and wet weather, of springtime and harvest. The Santals distinguish three seasons during the year, each possessing a characteristic climate. The "cold days" last from November to March. The rice harvest is gathered during the earlier part of this season; food is therefore plentiful and people relax. The skies for the most part remain clear, and the absence of movement in the air causes a blue haze to hang over the villages in the evenings, formed by the wood smoke of the cooking fires. The nights are cold; morning and evening the folk crouch over small fires in the open to warm themselves. Sometimes, when the wind blows off the distant Himalayas, the days are also cold. The new year begins at this time. Then come the "heat days", when the west wind scorches the skin during the midday hours and often the nights too are unbearably hot. From time to time a storm blows up from the north-west in the late afternoon, stirring the dust and then laying it and cooling the earth with welcome raindrops, while loud claps of thunder are heard and vivid flashes of lightning chase across the sky. During these days the forest trees shed their leaves and take on a garment of new green, flowering trees make gay patterns against the deep blue of the sky, while both men and women spend much time in the forests, the former hunting and fishing, the women gathering fruits, leaves and roots. Springs, streams and wells dry up, and many women have to go long distances to obtain water for domestic needs. Then come the "heavy-rain days", which last from the end of June till October, the time of the south-west monsoon on which so much depends. Eagerly the Santals watch the signs of the sky, working for long hours until all the rice seedlings have been planted out; then rain and sun are left to bring the increase, while men watch and tend the fields.

The year is also divided into two parts, one of which, the season from June until the new harvest has been reaped, is known as "hunger-time". This name is an eloquent reminder of the danger of starvation; even in normal years the Santal's holding of land is insufficient to support his family. The years

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CHAPTER 9

FESTIVALS

THE two great village festivals take place in the spring and after the harvest. The name of the former, *Baha*, means "Flower festival". It is held after the full moon in the month of *Phâlgun* (February-March). The hot season is about to begin, sap is rising in the trees, and the *sarjom* is resplendent with blossom and tender green leaves. Until the festival has taken place the women do not gather the *matkom* blossoms which provide them with both food and drink. It is held on different days in different villages so that the celebrations can be accompanied by a round of visits to relatives. The opening day of all festivals is a day of purification, known as "bathing day". On this day at the time of the Spring festival two temporary sheds are put up in the sacred grove and the young men carry out a hunt in the woods near the village. The priest completes his preparations and bathes certain articles in the waters of the village tank. At sunset three hens are taken to his house by the villagers, who remain there to dance. Three of the young men become spirit-possessed. One impersonates the "Five", another the Old Lady of the Sacred Grove, and the third takes the part of *Maran Buru*; they seize the implements which the priest has purified earlier in the day and make play with them. The priest receives them with respect; he washes their legs and, addressing the spirits, he asks for good fortune during the coming year. When this is over the young men are recalled to their senses by a series of sharp taps on their backs. Dancing is continued throughout the night in the village street just outside the priest's house.

In the early afternoon of the following day the priest is accompanied by the villagers in a singing procession to the sacred grove. On arrival there the same young men are again possessed and run away across the fields, being chased and brought back by the rest of the young men. The priest now assumes an attitude of great humility towards them. He receives them with a cloth tied round his neck in token of the submission of the village to the spirits. The hens are sacrificed and cooked in a hash with rice. The priest and his wife partake of one and the men of the village consume the rest of the food, after which everyone returns home except the priest. He has to remain in the grove until the young men return to escort him. He is then taken to every house in turn and received with great honour. His feet are